

Pentecost 15, Proper 18
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM

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Kingdom Living

The Old Testament lesson today tells of a funny sort of relationship. God will bring, says the prophet, a terrible recompense. But when you look at the recompense what is it? It's justice for the suffering, relief for the poor. What is so terrible about that? Maybe it depends on who's talking.

It stands in parallel with other passages in Isaiah. One of my favorites is,

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching.¹

This whole section of Isaiah includes chapter 53, the most famous of the Suffering Servant passages (thanks to Handel's "Messiah,"), where the suffering of a righteous person will somehow prove redemptive to a lost People of Israel. Here it is not the mythic bad-guy-vs.-good-guy, who duke it out on the cosmic battlefield like two medieval knights. In spite of how we normally think about the relationship between good and evil, here we see a different thing going on.

As Christians we see in the passages of the Suffering Servant a foreshadowing of the coming of Christ, whose death saves the world from sin and whose resurrection raises us to new life. But today's Gospel lesson we see the same thing going on in a rather economic way. The theologian and biblical scholar Gerd Thiessen, in his book, The Gospels in Context,² has an interesting analysis of the situation in which this story unfolds. The NRSV that we use calls her a "Gentile," but a better translation of the word is "Greek," one who has been Hellenized. The Hellenization of the area affected the upper classes first. Further evidence is noted in the word used for the sick girl's bed. It means a couch, a piece of furniture, not a poor person's straw tick. This woman is probably not poor.

He also notes that Tyre is a wealthy island off the coast of what is now Syria. As we

¹ Isaiah 42:1-4

² Thiessen, Gerd. *The Gospel in Context*. T & T Clark Publishers, 1998.

know, it made its money by seafaring commerce. It has little farmable land, and historically it has looked to the region of Galilee for its food. What was happening according to Thiessen is that the people of Tyre had enough money to outprice the locals on their own produce. What the foreigners were able to pay pushed the price of local produce up so much that the local people couldn't afford to buy the food produced in their own area. The Syrophenecians were the ones who were taking bread out of the mouths of the Israelite children. Jesus' comment to her is not a senselessly harsh insult; it is a statement of economic reality and a challenge to the one who represented the wrongdoers. The implication is that, because this woman was a wealthy woman from Tyre, she felt she deserved the miracle this lowly Hebrew boy could produce.

What is so remarkable, then, is the woman's response. She places herself in the position in which the Tyrians placed the Jewish farmers—the dogs. She reverses the economic machinery. It may look that Jesus is holding the illness of the woman's daughter hostage in exchange for an admission of humility, but that is unfair to the whole counsel of Scripture. In Isaiah 61 the prophet speaks of the chosen servant of the Lord,

*The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn...*³

In Luke 4 Jesus appropriates this passage to describe his ministry. Here again we see the great reversal which is the work of God in the world. Justice will be mercy. The woman has joined Jesus not just to get her daughter healed, but, understanding that the Kingdom Jesus brings is one of radical social justice based on mercy, she takes upon herself the work of gently, firmly and kindly overthrowing injustice. She's on Jesus' side—clear and simple.

For this response she gets the effects of the kingdom in her own life. Her own daughter, a slave to satanic forces, finds the freedom which is the sign of the coming of the Kingdom of Jesus.

The Epistle lesson lays it on the line, as is typical for James. Showing partiality is sin—nothing more and nothing less. The examples given are telling. The rich should not be shown deference. Are not the rich the ones who drag you into court and blaspheme the Excellent Name that was conferred upon you? In other words, they are the Roman powers who persecute you for being Christian, and they can do it because they are in

³ Isaiah 61:1-2

power, The new Kingdom finding expression in the church is threatening to the status quo, and the status quo is obviously good, because look how blessed they are because of it!

The poor have no stake in the status quo; it certainly doesn't "bless" them like it does the rich. But they are not be kicked aside for it, for they have a special role in showing what the Kingdom of God is all about: Humility before one another, deference due to being creatures of God.

The theme resounds through Scripture: There are social consequences for following Jesus, there are economic consequences to following God. The justice required by the Bible is uncomfortable for those in power. In view of this we understand the juxtaposition of themes in the first lesson today. The powerful can easily see the recompense of God as terrible, but the poor will welcome it.

What does it mean for us on this Labor Day weekend? One of the values of the American experiment is equality. I would like to think we got it from Scripture. Scripture was certainly invoked in the move toward independence, for it was the taxed without voice who rebelled, the ones kept under the economic thumb of the English crown. We know in our bones what it means to be marginalized. This holiday elevates and honors the efforts of the working class, the faceless machinery of the economy on whose backs the top 1% of the world owns 46% of the world's wealth. They are too often crucified, as Gustavo Gutierrez would say, on the cross of greed.

But in the centuries that have passed I venture to say we have lost touch with that part of our history. The rise of the American economy during the industrial revolution put the U.S. at the top of the world. We became the powerful. Whereas we have fallen from those lofty heights, with all its good and bad, we still assume that we are on top. There is a saying in the interculturalist world. "A Brit will walk into a bar overseas like he owns the place. An American will walk in like he doesn't care WHO owns the place!"

The woman of Tyre has a lot to teach us. Instead of asserting her economic superiority she joined the Kingdom of Jesus. For the Church to live the Kingdom in this world the powerful and the powerless must become one body. We must conceive of our ministries as ministries with, not to. We must reach out our hearts and our homes as well as our dollars and our hands. We must think carefully about what we do and why, and who it affects how. We must remember that there are those who will oppose us because true justice based on mercy is not their value or their goal—but such is the Kingdom of God.

Can you find the face of the poor? There are two places to find her. First is deep within.

Where is it that you feel overwhelmed, powerless or hopeless? Where is it that you are rendered poor in spirit? Where is life chewing you up and spitting you out? Where are you the victim of the powerful proud? If you can sit in that for long enough you will know what most of the world knows daily. You will also know what it means to depend on God and other people.

The second is in the face of every human being you see. It doesn't really matter how much money they make. (There are victims of injustice who make way more money than all of us combined.) But they are people. They are sick girls and desperate mothers, they are peevish disciples and offended peoples. They are foreigners and locals, of all color, religion and loves. They are the ones society kicks to the curb and walks on, the ones no one defends, the ones whose only hope for any dignity or safety in this world is in God and God's Kingdom.

Find her, then love her. Love her for the sake of God, love her for the sake of her own humanity, and love her for the love of the Kingdom. Then, and only then, will see the Kingdom come.